

# The Clipper Visits Terry Kennedy

by Judy Foley

"inez, it is a thing one woman can do/for another/we must not weep alone/that much is true/but los machos will always scare us/when we meet them on trains/that much is also true"

The verse is from *Durango*, the first book by Duxbury's own charmingly outrageous Terry Kennedy. The collection of poems, which is getting notices in small press reviews across the country, can be hard-hitting and bluntly feminist for those not ready for her brand of honesty. It can also be compelling and compassionate, as the above from "los machos, for inez garcia, raped, imprisoned, accused of murdering one of her attackers." The poem ends: "linda muchacha, it will not disappear/because of us/god on her cross cannot change it/what possesses the sex/possesses the soul/inez! inez! too much is true."

Terry Kennedy never stops reaching for the issues, and never holds back. During an interview on the day of Pope John's visit to Boston, Catholic-bred Terry zeroed in on abortion, marriage and children. The interview, in literary review *Stony Hill*, was "as outrageous as I could ask for," said Terry, along with a picture showing her straddling the cannon in the Pilgrim Church graveyard.

*Durango*, she admits, "was written during the hardest time of my life." Her book explains that at 26 she had stopped writing -- her only real ambition -- had 3 children, a hysterectomy for cancer and a nervous breakdown, all before her 29th birthday.

She's come a long way from those days of "psychic stress." Today she was sitting in her garden (her only other hobby) on Washington St., clad in loose comfortable blouse and skirt, catching a few moments in the late afternoon sun. She talked emphatically, jumping from one aspect of her work to another: free lance journalism, a novel in the works, and of course, *Durango*.



Terry Kennedy

"It all started 2 weeks after my first child was born. I was walking down Main St. in Flushing, N.Y. On the door of a store I'd been in a thousand times. I noticed a sign that read, 'No dogs or baby carriages allowed.' For the first time in my life I was shut out. Not too long ago I noticed the same sign in a Cohasset store. 'No dogs or babies allowed.' They even put the dogs first!"

She paused, then continued, "Society really expected me and every other mother in the country to damn well stay home. I was angry. I never encountered the feeling of a 2nd class citizen before."

In her book's introductory "self-portrait," Terry described her sudden awakening to poetry and recovery. "I was startled awake by the vision of a fiery, swirling tornado of words. Instantly I knew I would be well again as soon as I began to write. The complete metamorphosis from material/destructive self into spiritual/creative self lasted maybe 30 seconds in all. From that moment on, I took to my work with a zealot's energy and a fanatic's conviction. Before long I stopped seeing my psychiatrist and bought a typewriter."

Her children are grown now: Lee Michael, 16; Sheila, 15 and Eugene, 13. She and architect husband Lee have lived in Duxbury for 7 years, after moving from NYC, Scituate and Norwell. "We were looking for a small town where the kids could ride their bikes to school and recreation. I was trying to work fulltime and driving them everywhere for 2 hours a day." She herself loved the city. "That was where I felt I should be."

Her poetry, she says, is no work at all, more like a lifeline. But writing has been her life, and in all her works she is intense, involved and committed.

She was born in Bellows Falls, Vt., a small factory town, daughter of Polish immigrants. Her father was a laborer, her mother a hotel chambermaid. "As a child, I would sit at my mother's desk and 'write' long before I could even read. It was a cool place, a little room with a desk and I would sit for hours and write little stories."

She went to Catholic grammar schools and got her first real exposure to writing from the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Polish order of Felician nuns. "They were always having us write something."

While in high school, she was both writing for student publications and acting, and she won a scholarship to the Weston Playhouse in Vermont, "the first time I got paid for having fun." She spent 4 summers at the playhouse, and gained recognition for her dramatics. But at Regis College she got hooked on journalism and has been writing ever since. In 1963, she won a Fulbright scholarship to Poland for the theatre. But circumstances kept her from going, and she soon married Lee Kennedy.

In 1974, as part of the Goddard College MFA writing program, she was apprenticed to Morgan Gibson and the late Anne Sexton, whose influence on Terry is apparent throughout *Durango*. She won the Fels award for the most outstanding new American poet, and in 1976, won a McDowell

Fellowship to attend the renowned artist colony. "I had always been writing, but it was mainly a peripheral thing. After McDowell, I could accept that I was a writer without feeling guilty about doing something I loved."

Her work as a freelance writer is serious business. "I'm business oriented and industrious. I wouldn't write anything without getting paid. It's work, just like cleaning floors." Success, she says, often has little to do with art. She cloisters herself in a small studio adjacent to the house, and works up to 18 hours a day. Her articles have appeared in the **Village Voice**, **Providence Journal**, the **Real Paper**, **Phoenix** and various magazines.

"I've never gotten used to the fact that writing is a solitary life. People think I can be gregarious and social, but I always have to deny that. The kids demand time. But that's given, not grudgingly. It's necessary."

Her second collection of poems is due to be published by A.D. Winanas, publisher of Second Coming Press in San Francisco. She is working on a novel based on the case of Denise and Edward Gallison, convicted of manslaughter of their 2-year old daughter and assault and battery on their 4-year old son.

"The Gallison case evoked a response in me from the beginning and I've been completely immersed ever since." She published a story on Denise Gallison in the **Real Paper** and that led to a request from Doubleday for a full manuscript.

"The issue of child abuse is important to me. As a mother, I know how difficult it can be," Terry Kennedy, who vented her own frustrations creatively through her poems, spoke with some understanding of a woman who could turn on her child. "And no one ever interviewed him during the whole thing." She followed their trials and visits them weekly at Norfolk and Framingham prisons.

The case became a springboard "for the galloping issues of the 70's that have consumed me": motherhood, foster care, abused children, human services and prison life.

Terry keeps a desk at the Middlesex County courthouse in Cambridge, "a space away from home." From that point she turns out stories from the district court. "The need to monitor judges is important. In general, say at Plymouth District Court, there is no reporter assigned there every day. There's no way to keep track of the hours put in by judges, the DA, lawyers. The new court reform laws are not much good unless someone is there seeing that they're enforced. Judges especially are notorious; 10-1 is considered a long day for them."

"The trouble is with priorities in most newspapers." She has little use for big fashion layouts and church news, or dependency on the wire services. "Most newspapers' priorities are based on their advertisers. But I think a poet can be the right person to define the news."

She recently started her own news agency, called Newstories. "The average news reporting can bore the reader to death. There's no immediacy, like you found in Walt Whitman's Specimen Days. In on-the-spot reporting, I'm challenged to keep the poetic in the news. I accumulate the facts and make a story on the facts. I always try to combine the 2, and put them together in one flow."

"I'm sick of the journalism school graduates who become editors and have never written a paragraph in their lives. I just don't believe that news has to be written like an obituary."

Her work has taken her into investigative reporting, and her most difficult work was a case on a lucrative swordfish smuggling operation in New England. Federal indictments have been handed down as recently as last week, following a lengthy investigation of charges that more than 200,000 pounds of swordfish was smuggled from Canada to avoid mercury-contamination inspection, to be sold to markets and restaurants across the northeast.

She has also taught creative writing at various colleges such as Regis, Bristol Community College, Tufts and Boston State. This is the first year she has

not taught. "Teaching involved minimal work and it paid well. But most people have very little idea of the work involved in writing. They have a fantasy that you just sit down and it all comes out neatly. I was constantly exposed to people with no respect for writing. It was a job in itself, and totally exhausting."

Her favorite job was a course in assertiveness training for women at the Duxbury adult education program. "You know, every one of those women were able to get jobs afterwards, with good positions. Most felt they weren't qualified for anything. I had them write resumes, and they found that managing homes and organizations had been experience they had never counted."

She has been invited to read at the Moulton Playhouse in Laguna Beach, Cal. at the 8th Annual Poets Festival in August. "I'm really excited about it. I'll be reading on the same stage as Lawrence Berlinghetti, a well-known American poet whom I've admired for years. This is like finally making it to the first string after playing 2nd string all your life."

The week prior to the festival, she will do a benefit reading in Bishop, Cal., during a 2-day arts program to raise funds for a health clinic at the Toiyabee Indian Reservation.

Her life is a non-stop whirlwind kaleidoscope of involvement in her work and the issues surrounding her. She's anti-establishment, perhaps. "definitely anti-status quo." But above all are the high standards she demands from her craft and a commitment to those she writes about.

And in that, Terry Kennedy is doing exactly what she enjoys the most.